The Saint of the Sick & the Poor

One man’s mission to celebrate his Mexican village saint here in NYC, for those who can’t go back home

By Itzel Castro

New York City, United States — Amid an altar covered with offerings of marigold flowers, stands a porcelain statue of San Lucas. Known also as “Luke the Evangelist,” the three feet tall figurine is dressed in intricately-designed vestments, made of real red silk and covered with crucifix patterns woven in gold thread. A crown on its head glimmers under the lights.

“He is the saint of the village,” said Alejandro Morales, 43, a native from Puebla, Mexico and the founding organizer of the San Lucas celebration that takes place every year in Bath Beach, Brooklyn. As he moves the statue to the middle of the altar, he looks back at San Lucas and adds, “We do this in part for those who can’t go back home.”

From Puebla to New York

The celebration honors San Lucas, a saint beloved in San Lucas Atzala, a village in Puebla located in Central Mexico. According to the U.S. Census, in New York City, there are around 319,000 Mexican immigrants. The majority of them come from Morales’s home state of Puebla and they make up the third largest Latinx diaspora. The celebration that Morales founded gathers poblanos, people from Puebla, many of whom are undocumented and can’t go back home. In past years, thousands have attended. The celebration is community funded and it creates a sense of unity.

“We wanted to practice our traditions as there are people from our village who have not gone back to Mexico, due to their status,” said Morales. “We decided to form a committee to be able to carry this out.”

In 2015, Morales took the initiative to start a six member committee to bring the San Lucas celebration to New York City, after many people from his community missed the celebration in their hometown of Puebla, which takes place every October. Morales, decided to organize a meeting and recruit members of his own family and community to start off the fundraising efforts to hold the celebration every year.
“My dad and the committee work very hard to make this happen every year,” said Alejandro Morales Jr, 24, volunteer organizer and son of Morales. “I’m happy that they can give back to their community.”

This is going to be their third year hosting it in the Saint Finbar Catholic Church, a church founded by the Irish, but now with a mostly Latinx congregation. Morales, has been attending this church for the past 15 years, since he arrived in New York City. The committee fundraises in the summer to able to have this celebration in the fall.

“We have the advantage that we have a large Mexican community here,” said Morales. “The goal is always to work together to put this on every year.”

So many Mexicans from the state of Puebla have made New York City their second home, that its earned the city the moniker PueblaYork. In An Urban Historical Portrait of Mexican Migration in New York City, historian David A. Badillo describes how Mexican immigration spiked in New York City in the 1980s due to the transnational era. Currently, Mexicans are one of the fastest-growing populations in New York City, according to the Pew Research Center. More than 60 percent of all Mexicans who live in New York City reside in Brooklyn and Queens, although there are significant populations in the Bronx and in Manhattan.

Not only do Mexican immigrants leave behind physical belongings when they make the trek up north, but they also lose the opportunity to partake in their traditions back in their village. Knowing this, the committee understands the responsibility that they have in their hands to put together the celebration. Preparations for the big day of San Lucas begin six months before the actual event. For example, the organizers host an annual dance for Cinco de Mayo, a day that commemorates the Mexican Army victory over the French in the Battle of Puebla, to raise funds through tickets, food, and drink sales. This is their main way of fundraising for the celebration.

“This year there were many people who responded,” said Alberta Ventura, 62, aunt of Morales and member of the committee for San Lucas. “They donated for the food, for the flowers, and for other expenses.”

The committee was able to raise enough funds in May to celebrate San Lucas official day in October.

PueblaYork celebrates San Lucas
San Lucas Evangelista, also known as ‘Luke the Evangelist’ was a physician who used to help the sick and the poor, his memory gathered a large following, including people from Mexico, a country in which Catholicism is the dominant religion. The symbol for San Lucas gospel is a white bull, an animal that was often sacrificed as an offering to God.

According to Dr. Lauren Mancia, director of the studies in religion program at City University of New York, saints mean a lot to worshippers from the Catholic Church.

“The only Christians who worship saints are Catholics,” said Mancia. “So if I’m a Catholic and I’m praying to a particular saint, Catholics believe that saints will turn and advocate on behalf of them to God.”

The celebration begins with an evening mass that starts off with the entrance of San Lucas who is carried to the altar with the help of four congregants. He is facing the audience of poblanos who are there to worship a saint that reminds them of home. Some people are seen wearing traditional clothing while others wear the same shade of red as the saint, to show respect and admiration.

Before the special mass ends, those who wish to pay their respects to San Lucas do so during the presentation of gifts. Some people touch the saint, pray, and cross themselves to show appreciation. Since San Lucas, was a physician they often ask for protection of their health along with the health of their relatives and friends.

“The ritual means a lot to us,” said Morales. “We want to keep the memory of San Lucas alive.”

After mass, the saint is transported by the same four men to the Saint Finbar Monsignor Scanlan Parish Center. The venue’s ceiling is decorated with cutouts of the saint and the tables are adorned with colorful floral centerpieces. Steel stands for lighting are set up on the dance floor. The center is soon filled with the sweet and spicy aroma of mole, a traditional dish from Puebla.

After the meal, rays of blue, green, and yellow lights direct everyone’s attention to the folkloric dances that are performed by people from Puebla and dedicated to San Lucas.

“My favorite part is the dance of the little bull because San Lucas is known for his bulls so when you do the dance it is a form of celebrating him,” said Morales.
The committee hopes to grow the celebration in the next upcoming years so they can attract more people who are either from Puebla or who are just interested in the vibrant culture.